

What E.J. Dionne Doesn't Get About Conservatism

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As the Republican presidential candidates head into the home stretch of the primary-season-opening Iowa caucuses on Feb. 1, few conservatives are content with the condition of conservatism. Supporters of Donald Trump, Ted Cruz, and Ben Carson — at the moment a majority of whom say they plan to vote in the GOP primaries — seem to scorn establishment Republicans almost as much as they despise President Obama. Backers of Marco Rubio, Chris Christie, Jeb Bush, and John Kasich appear to be as baffled by Trump, Cruz, and Carson supporters as they are displeased with Obama.

Democrats are inclined to view the spectacle on the right with delight. Rarely does it occur to progressives that anything of redeeming value can be gleaned from the debates among conservatives.

The dark mood of many GOP primary voters that feeds Trump's lead may cause Republicans to lose another winnable presidential election. But in duking it out, GOP candidates have presented more-than-respectable alternatives (and some inflammatory ones) to Obama positions on key issues including immigration, the Affordable Care Act, the ballooning deficit and impending insolvency of Social Security, the Iran deal, the rise of ISIS, and the need, in the face of Russian and Chinese adventurism, to reassert America's role in maintaining international order.

In addition, Republicans are putting before voters two matters that appear to hold next to no interest for progressives but are deeply rooted in the American constitutional order. One is the principle of limited government, which is embodied in the Constitution's enumeration and separation of powers and the Bill of Rights. The other is the protection of traditional morality. This includes respect for virtues — self-restraint, industriousness, and fairness — that are typically learned in families, communities, and through religion.

Although much maligned — in part because it is much misunderstood — political moderation is one of these virtues. Its highest expression consists in balancing competing principles and claims. It is a trait indispensable to conservatives, since their political hopes depend on harmonizing the principle of limited government and the claims of traditional morality.

In "Why the Right Went Wrong: Conservatism From Goldwater to the Tea Party and Beyond," progressive Washington Post columnist E. J. Dionne Jr. argues that not only has conservatism lost its way by jettisoning moderation, but in the process it has inflicted great harm on the country. "The breakdown in American government and the dysfunction in our

politics are the result of the steady radicalization of American conservatism,” he writes. In Dionne’s telling, President Obama’s only notable contribution to the crisis has been his “failure to anticipate” conservative extremism, “and his tardiness in dealing with it.”

There are several problems here. One is contemporary progressivism’s own repudiation of moderation. Another is Dionne’s view, commonplace on the left, that the proof of the right’s immoderation is somehow found in conservatives’ refusal to embrace progressive goals.

“To assume that Obama was ever in a position to build broad support among Republicans for his program,” Dionne maintains, “ignores their determination, from the very first day of his presidency, to prevent progressive policies from taking hold.”

Such immoderation, he argues, has characterized conservatism since the wrong turn it took in 1964 by rejecting the accommodating stance toward progressivism characteristic of President Dwight D. Eisenhower in favor of the extremism of Republican presidential nominee Barry Goldwater, who believed that the New Deal betrayed both limited government and traditional morality. Only, contends Dionne, when conservatives once again adopt the spirit of balance and compromise — a Burkean spirit Dionne finds not only in Eisenhower but also in abundance in Obama — will conservatives deserve a share in governing the “raucous, pluralistic, multicultural country” that America has become.

Dionne is a prominent member of the Washington Beltway establishment and a versatile analyst of American politics. His recounting in his new book of the last half-century of conservatism in America demonstrates expertise in public policy and polls, intimate familiarity with campaigns and the media, and an abiding interest in political ideas. He also stands out among his progressive peers for his willingness to at least acknowledge the value of “conservatism’s skepticism about the grand plans we progressives sometimes offer, its respect for traditional institutions, and its skepticism of those who believe that politics can remold human nature.”

Nevertheless, Dionne is an incorrigible partisan. His determination to defeat conservatism overwhelms his interest in understanding the conservative spirit and the moderation that sustains it.

Since before Obama was elected president, Dionne’s progressive enthusiasms have impaired his powers of political prognostication. On Nov. 5, 2008, the day after Obama’s historic victory and the Democrats’ sweep of the House and Senate, Dionne proclaimed that “the country put a definitive end to a conservative era.” In 2010, he described the Tea Party as “one of the most successful scams in American history.” His reasoning was that the movement “constitutes a sliver of opinion on the extreme end of politics receiving attention out of all proportion with its numbers.” If so, it was a short-lived scam, or so it seemed to Dionne in October 2013. Then he stated that “the era of the far right and the era of the Tea Party is over.”

Without acknowledging the flip-flop, he now argues that the Tea Party is going strong and embodies the essence of modern conservatism's wrong turn in the 1960s. This opinion is as flawed as the one it supplants.

In Dionne's view, conservatism remains in the throes of a racism that was crucial in the 1960s and 1970s to attracting Southern and white working-class voters. Furthermore, he argues, conservatism's continuing opposition to progressive ambitions to increase redistribution of wealth, expand government regulation of the economy and society, and use state power to liberalize sexual norms and dictate correct moral and political opinions stems from intolerance and fear of change.

This crude rendering of conservative convictions reflects the polarizing penchant of the progressive mind to view dissent from its beliefs as ignorance, delusion, or wickedness.

The vast majority of conservatives recognize that in contemporary circumstances the protection of individual freedom requires the federal government, within parameters derived from the Constitution, to regulate the economy and provide a social safety net. At the same time, conservative anger at government overreach and underperformance has hindered the formulation of productive conservative policy options and thwarted the search for genuine common ground with the other side.

Moderation, therefore, is crucial. But the interest conservatives have in cultivating it is not to serve progressive ambitions.

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